Executive Summary for JCBOE Minority Presentation to NCSBE_13 January 2026

Selection of an Early Voting Site for the Cullowhee Precinct

Purpose

This summary synthesizes the historical record, empirical evidence, and due-diligence findings related to the selection of early voting sites in the Cullowhee precinct, with particular attention to administrative feasibility, fiscal responsibility, and meaningful voter access.

Background and History

In 2016, following advocacy by students, university leadership, and the broader community, the Jackson County Board of Elections unanimously approved an early voting site on the campus of Western Carolina University (WCU), located in the Hinds University Center. Since its establishment, this site has operated through five general elections and four primaries.

Cullowhee is not a municipality and owns no public buildings; therefore, polling locations are limited to county-owned facilities and state-owned WCU property. The Cullowhee precinct is the largest in Jackson County, with 6,321 registered voters, comprising two distinct populations:

- a geographically dispersed, older, predominantly rural population (average voter age ~50), and
- a tightly concentrated campus population that is younger (average voter age ~32) and more diverse.

WCU voters represent more minority voters than the rest of the county combined. Over 80% of students are North Carolina residents, and more than 25% are from rural western North Carolina.

Use, Performance, and Impact of the WCU Early Voting Site

Since 2016, more than 76,000 votes have been cast at the WCU early voting site. Youth engagement (ages 18–25) among Jackson County voters more than doubled relative to statewide youth participation (from 4.3% to 9.6%). The WCU site also produced the highest proportion of same-day registrations (SDR) in the state, with approximately 28% of early voters registering on site. Research indicates SDR is among the most effective practices for increasing youth voter participation.

These outcomes demonstrate that the WCU location has materially expanded participation among younger and more diverse voters without diminishing access for other voters.

Existing Polling Locations and Accessibility Constraints

Both the WCU site and the Cullowhee Parks & Recreation (P&R) facility meet all statutory requirements for early voting, including ADA compliance, security, and space for electioneering boundaries.

The P&R facility has served as the precinct polling place for over 20 years and functions adequately for early voting in primaries and for Election Day voting when the gymnasium is available. However, the gymnasium cannot be used for early voting due to security limitations.

Distance and access were critical factors in establishing the WCU site. The P&R facility is approximately 1.7 miles from the center of campus. There is no public or university-sponsored transportation to the site, pedestrian access is unsafe due to highway conditions, and approximately 68% of WCU students do not have personal vehicles. These conditions significantly limit practical access for the campus population.

2026 Primary Early Voting Plan and Due Diligence

On November 18, 2025, the Board majority proposed eliminating the WCU early voting site, citing fiscal responsibility and proximity between sites. The minority successfully moved to table the decision to allow for due diligence on alternative options.

During the interim, site visits were conducted at both P&R and WCU. Both institutions confirmed that any viable facility would be provided at no cost to the county.

Analysis of P&R options determined that while the historic meeting room could serve as a single early voting site for a primary election, it could not logistically support a general election's expected early voting volume (5,000–6,000 voters). Newly constructed pool-adjacent rooms were found unsuitable due to security, visibility, and functional limitations.

Cost analysis by minority members—both experienced poll workers—indicated that consolidating to a single P&R site would yield savings closer to $6,000 rather than the $20,000 cited by the majority, due to increased staffing needs and high SDR volumes. Moreover, consolidating sites would significantly reduce meaningful access for student voters.

WCU Alternatives and the Health and Human Sciences (HHS) Building

At the Board's request, WCU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning conducted a comprehensive review of campus facilities. Of six locations evaluated, two

were deemed viable: the existing Hinds University Center site (with enhancements) and the Health and Human Sciences (HHS) Building.

The HHS Building addresses all constraints identified by the majority:

- It is a stand-alone facility on WCU's Millennial Campus, separate from the main campus.
- Guaranteed availability for all 2026 election activities.
- Reserved parking for 20–30 voters within 200 feet and accessible curbside voting.
- Equivalent security provisions to existing sites.
- Served every 15 minutes by campus transit (Cat Tran) for students and WCU Staff.
- Familiar to the broader community, hosting 7 public clinics and having served over 10,000 county residents during COVID vaccination efforts.

Public Input and Administrative Considerations

At the December 9, 2025 Board meeting, 21 members of the public spoke, with all but two supporting retention of an early voting site on the WCU campus.

The record demonstrates that eliminating a campus-adjacent early voting site would result in minimal fiscal savings while significantly reducing access for a large, eligible, and historically under-represented voter population. Conversely, the HHS option offers a fiscally neutral, logistically sound solution that preserves access, accommodates all voting configurations, and satisfies expressed administrative concerns.

Conclusion

Based on historical performance, empirical voting outcomes, cost analysis, accessibility considerations, and completed due diligence, maintaining a WCU-adjacent early voting site—particularly through the HHS Building—best aligns with statutory obligations, fiscal responsibility, and the goal of providing practical and meaningful access to all Cullowhee precinct voters.

Jackson County Board of Elections (JCBOE)
2026 Primary Election Plan - Minority Report

HISTORY: In 2016 the Jackson County Board of Elections, with a Republican majority under then-governor Pat McCrory and after advocacy by student groups, University administration and the broader community, unanimously approved an early voting plan that established an early voting site in the Hinds Building on the campus of Western Carolina University (WCU). That site has been used for early voting in every election since that time.

USE & BENEFIT: In five general elections and four primaries, over 76,000 votes have been cast at this location. The impacts to Jackson County voters in the 18-25 age group relative to the NC youth vote in general include a more than doubled (4.3 to 9.6%) percentage of young adults voting and a significant increase to same-day registrations (SDR). WCU had vastly higher proportion of SDRs (28% of early voters) of any site in the state and it should be noted that SDR does more to increase youth voting than any other electoral practice. (Reference Professor Chris Cooper, Substack Dec. 7, 2025)

POLLING PLACES: Both early voting locations in Cullowhee, WCU and at a nearby Jackson County Parks and Recreation facility (Parks and Rec) meet all of the statutory requirements for Early Voting, including: ADA compliance; fiscally responsible; sufficient power access; adequate secure dedicated voter space; and reserved space for required electioneering area.

Since 2016, the satellite Early Voting location has been housed at the Hinds University Center (UC) in the second floor Multipurpose Room. The sizable (30x60') room is accessed by stairs, ramp or elevator. Ample parking is available adjacent to the UC as well as a reserved curbside voting area. The UC is in the center of the campus and is an easily walkable location for the University community. The majority criticism of the site has been that it is not easily accessed by the community at-large since non-university residents do not know their way around the campus. The minority disputes this premise However as one of Jackson County's largest employers, and as evidenced by the average age (32) of voters using the polling place to vote early, one can argue that many non-students also take advantage of this site.

The Cullowhee precinct polling place has been located at the Parks and Rec facility at 88 Cullowhee Mountain Rd. That facility opened 20+ years ago. Ample parking is available and early voting takes place in an easily accessed, moderately sized meeting room (16'x32') which accommodates the primary and general election early voting volumes satisfactorily. On election day itself, voting takes place in the adjacent gymnasium to accommodate the expected larger volume of voters and additional poll workers and voting equipment. (*Note: Gymnasium is inadequately secured and can't be used for Early Voting.*)

The distance from WCU to the Parks and Rec facility was a critical factor in the establishment of the WCU early voting location in 2016. The precinct polling location is 1.7 miles from the center of campus and there is currently no public or WCU-sponsored transportation to and from the Park & Recreation site. Pedestrian traffic on NC-107 is almost non-existent due to it being a very busy 4-lane highway with no sidewalks and narrow roadway shoulders. Also, the 2-lane converges to a single lane approximately half the distance to the Parks and Rec facility which adds to the hazards for the pedestrian. Alternate terrain is occasionally available for the pedestrian via a weedy field of 6" tall growth and uneven footing. Walking takes almost 40 minutes one-way (demonstrated) from the campus Clock Tower to the Parks and Rec building entry. Approximately 68% of WCU students do not have personal vehicles and the majority refuses to address the safety and access issues for student pedestrians. For example, the Chair has explicitly stated "If they want to get there they'll get there. I'm not concerned about that."

JCBOE Meeting of November 18, 2025: The majority plan for early voting was presented by the chairman Bill Thompson without advance notification that the majority were proposing a significant change from the traditional early voting plan (5-sites including WCU). Proposed was the elimination of the UC (WCU) polling place in the interest of "fiscal responsibility" (*~$20K per site*) and "proximity" (*<2 miles between voting sites*) and the implied requirement that the Cullowhee precinct voting for the 2026 Primary and all future elections would be a single voting location that could support a voting configuration (personnel and equipment) that would be available to serve anyone that chose that location from the entire county for early voting and also be large enough to serve as the Cullowhee Precinct for the larger voter volumes on election day.

Given that the Parks and Rec facility could not logistically serve as the sole early voting site for a general election (~6000 early voters), the minority moved that the final early voting plan decision be tabled to allow for gathering information about possible alternative sites that could viably serve BOTH the University community and the at-large community for all Cullowhee precinct Early Voting and for the election day voting. The motion to vote on the revised Early Voting plan was tabled until December 9th 2025 on a 4-1 vote in order to complete the due diligence necessary to provide the Board with better informed details for the revised voting plan.

During the interim, two site meeting were held, one at Parks and Rec with their staff members, the JCBOE Director and a staff member, and 2 Board members including the chair and one from the minority. The second meeting was held at WCU and staffed similarly to the first. WCU was represented by their Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL). Both organizations stated that any viable building selected would be provided at no cost to the JCBOE.

Parks and Rec Due Diligence: 2 possible scenarios were discussed, the first being continued use of the room used historically for early voting and the other for 2 recently

completed rooms at the new Pool facility built in 2024-25 and contiguous to the older Parks and Rec facility.

Minority due diligence indicated the newer pool locations would be compromised by at-ground 9' window/doors installed with direct visibility into the rooms from the pool area and also providing access to the pool area, and an additional 8' window at ground level accessible to pedestrian traffic on the building exterior. The rooms were built for pool parties and besides interrupting their use for that purpose for the 3-week duration of early voting, positioning of voting equipment to prevent observation of early voter observation would be difficult at best. Other issues were identified included site security during days with no voting, distance from building entry to voting location, distance to curbside voting, width of hallway, and possible ballot contamination due to higher area humidity from the adjacent pool.

The minority agrees that the historic voting location at Parks and Rec would certainly suffice as a single entity for the Early Voting application (expecting ~1500 voters as well as much increased SDR voters (131 during the 2024 Primary). However, the room is not at all viable as a single early voting site for a general election as the interior space available could not logistically accommodate the staff and equipment necessary to support the 5000-6000 voters and nearly 900 SDR voters that would be expected for general election early voting.

For early voting the Parks and Rec site would need increased staff and voting equipment and our minority analysis is based on the input of those that have worked both sites regularly for Primary and General election activities. Both minority Board members are long time poll workers and both have worked WCU and Parks and Rec as judges in the past. Our analysis indicates the savings using 1 site vs 2 sites for the Primary would be on the order of $6,000 vs the $20K savings presented by the majority due to >50% staff increases and the large number of expected SDR voters. The Gym would still serve as the election day voting site. The most obvious impact of the analysis would be the logistical difficulties with practical and meaningful access of the student population to early voting.

WCU Due Diligence: The meeting was held at the HF Robinson Administration facility and attended by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) representatives, the JCBOE Director and one BOE staff member, and the JCBOE Chair and one minority member. CCESL agreed to formulate a detailed accounting of all local WCU facilities that might accommodate all Cullowhee precinct election activities regardless of early voting and election day voter volumes. The CCESL representatives followed through and delivered a report on December 5th 2025 to the JCBOE that provided a building-by-building detail of what WCU voting spaces that might possibly be eligible for early voting, the viability of each, and how each met or failed to meet the polling location requirements. Of the 6 locations identified in the report, 3 were considered non-viable, one was possibly viable (Listen B Ramsey Hospitality Room), the current Hinds location was viable with recommended

enhancements, and one building, the Health and Human Sciences (HHS) building was also viable without issue. The official report delivered to the JCBOE is found as Appendix A to this document and much better describes each of the facilities, their viability, and the details of how WCU would support their use as voting sites.

JCBOE Meeting of December 9, 2025: The BOE reconvened on Dec. 9, 2025 at 10 a.m. as planned. During the regular public comment time 21 members of the public spoke, all but two in favor of retaining the polling place on the WCU campus.

Based on the majority comments to the minority throughout the due diligence process, parking at and accessibility to any location satisfactory for hosting all voting configurations are the two main constraints from selecting a WCU site for voting applications subsequent to the Primary of 2026. Voter unfamiliarity with the campus layout, distance to voting for the elderly and physically constrained, and a perceived lack of neutrality were all mentioned and documented as additional constraints. All these majority constraints were addressed and resolved by the CCESL report, the reporting of Dr. Chris Cooper regarding neutrality, and the CCESL representatives at the referenced meeting. Never-the-less, Member Pavey introduced a motion to the Board for approval of the 2026 Primary Election Early Voting Plan as revised to use only 4 early voting sites including:

- Cashiers Rec Center (255 Frank Allen Dr. Cashiers NC)
- Qualla Community Building (181 Shoal Creek Church Rd. Whittier NC)
- Sylva BOE office (876 Skyland Dr. Suite 1, Sylva NC)
- Cullowhee Rec Center (88 Cullowhee Mtn Rd. Cullowhee NC)

The motion was approved by a vote of 3 For and 2 Against which, given the North Carolina statutory requirements for a non-unanimous vote, mandates that the decision for the Jackson County 2026 Primary Early Voting Plan content to be delegated to the North Carolina State Board of Elections.

2026 Primary Early Voting Plan - Minority Recommendation: Remarkably, of the 6 sites identified by the WCU committee as eligible for consideration as a voting site, WCU identified a very large room (150 person capacity>5000 ft^2) at the new Health and Human Sciences (HHS) Building as their most viable option. The details included with that offer resolved every constraint postulated by the majority and are available for review as the CCESL report appended to this document. The HHS building is located on the WCU Millennial Campus that is separate and apart from the main WCU campus and avoids the complications of finding a building on campus as it is a stand-alone building about one mile from the main campus and adjacent to Little Savannah Rd. which in rural terms is the main business street of Cullowhee. Availability of the room is guaranteed by WCU at no cost for all election activities scheduled for 2026. WCU will also provide reserved parking for 20-30 voters within 200 feet of the building entrance (same as Parks and Rec accessibility) and the parking lot is level with the building entrance and ADA compliant. Curbside is equally accessible for the poll workers, security is identical to that provided to the University at large, doors will be re-keyed to JCBOE security requirements, lockable closets available within the room, and room

availability hours would be as deemed required by the JCBOE. Most helpful is the building is served by the Campus transportation system (Cat Tran) that has buses serving students, faculty, and staff from campus to the facility every 15 minutes. Finally, the building is already used by many county clients that visit the 7 clinics in the building for medical services which was also host to 10,000 Jackson County residents for COVID vaccine applications during the epidemic so community familiarity with the area is already well established.

2026 Primary Early Voting Plan - Minority Alternative: Although not presented at the Board meeting of December 9th but still very much a viable alternative would be to revert back to tradition and continue to hold early voting in the satellite location at the UC (~1800 ft^2) and the Cullowhee Parks and Rec facility (~570ft^2) for the 2026 Primary. Because the main expense to the county is salaries, closing a site would not be eliminating poll workers, just re-deploying them to another location. An analysis of costs (see Appendix B) indicate that savings would be minimal, approximately $6,000 vs. the $20,000 cost reported by the majority in their presentation. Recall also the number of SDRs in the student-voter population, almost 900, which take much more voting time on average than for a previously registered voter, and also requires more experienced "Help Desk" poll workers. And because the traditional model was predicated long before the Primary Election Plan meeting of November 18th, the 5-site configuration is budgeted and presents no financial issue to the county. The rationale of the majority is "fiscal responsibility" but the Jackson County BOE has a long history of coming in under budget and returning funds to the county; no demonstration of waste or attestation of how savings would/should be reallocated was made by the majority. It begs the question, what is the budget for, if not to serve the voters of Jackson County?

The chairman presented a plan to consolidate the two early voting sites into one at the Park & Recreation location on Cullowhee Mountain Rd. The minority is not persuaded that the majority has taken into consideration the practical and meaningful access to early voting for the student population, given the characteristics of the impracticality of walking and the absence of public or University transportation to the site. Nor have they considered the facts including that the HHS building is probably the most likely candidate for resolving every one of the election constraints identified by the majority, that WCU has long been an excellent and welcoming host for the JCBOE election operations, and conducting the Primary early voting and election day activities at the HHS would provide a perfect operational test platform for both voters and poll staff for the General election to be held in November 2026.

Appendix A – WCU Polling Site Information

Western Carolina University Polling Site Information
for
Jackson County Board of Elections

Last Updated: 12/05/2025

Introduction

As requested by the Jackson County Board of Elections at their November 18, 2025, meeting, this report contains options related to enhancements of WCU's current early voting site and information regarding the exploration of other potential polling site locations on campus. As the historic liaison between WCU and the Jackson County Board of Elections, this information is prepared by WCU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL).

The administration of the buildings on WCU's campus belongs to the building's most relevant department such as the Department of Campus Activities, Athletics, a particular college, etc. CCESL consulted with the administrators of each of the sites below, as well as senior leadership, to obtain the information. Parking Operations was also consulted for information regarding designated voter parking.

Current Site – Enhancements Available

A.K. Hinds University Center, Multipurpose Room (UC #232)
245 Memorial Dr, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Basic information
  - Availability for Spring 2026
    - Early Voting, yes
    - Election Day, yes
  - Availability for Fall 2026
    - Early Voting, yes
    - Election Day, yes
  - Room size
    - Max capacity is 110
  - Security
    - Yes, able to be locked
  - Building hours
    - Open and staffed during voting times
  - ADA compliance
    - Yes
    - Bathrooms available
  - Curbside voting
    - Yes, in the University Center side lot
  - Parking
    - As utilized in the past, parking in Lot #29 (next to the UC) includes 6 designated voter spots, including 3 handicapped spots.

        - Parking Operations has offered to provide enhanced parking with exclusive voter access to the Reid Parking lot, up to an additional 80 spaces.
    - Cost
        - Space is provided free of charge.
- Additional considerations
    - Dates are reserved for early voting and election day through all of 2026.
    - Additional signage can be provided to direct voters to the UC and parking, including up to 6 electronic signs, numerous sidewalk and yard signs.
    - This voting location was established 9 years ago with bi-partisan support from Rep. Joe Sam Queen and Senator Tom Apodoca.

<u>Alternative Site Exploration – Viable Options</u>

Health and Human Sciences Building, Multipurpose Room (#204)

4121 Little Savannah Rd, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Basic information
    - Availability for Spring 2026 (see additional considerations below)
        - Early Voting, yes
        - Election Day, yes
    - Availability for Fall 2026
        - Early Voting, yes
        - Election Day, yes
    - Room size
        - Max capacity is 150
    - Security
        - Yes, doors able to be locked
    - Building hours
        - Building hours differ from main campus. Building hour adjustments and accommodations can be made to address this.
    - ADA compliance
        - Yes
        - Bathrooms available
    - Curbside voting
        - Yes
    - Parking
        - 20-30 spaces at the upper lot of HHS exclusive to voters, including curbside.
    - Cost
        - Typically, there is a $85 per day charge as well as a housekeeping, however, the University leadership has expressed willingness to sort through logistics and cost should this site be chosen and provide it free of charge.

- Additional considerations
    - This location is already on the CatTran route, providing no additional cost transportation option.
    - Some meetings/events are currently scheduled in this space during spring 2026 voting. Senior leadership expressed willingness to sort through these logistics and make the space available, should this site be chosen.

Alternative Site Exploration – Maybe or Partial Options

Liston B. Ramsey Regional Activity Center, Hospitality Room

92 Catamount Rd, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Basic information
    - Availability for Spring 2026 (see additional considerations below)
        - Early Voting, yes
        - Election Day, yes
    - Availability for Fall 2026
        - Unlikely due to Football
    - Room size
        - Large space, will have use of 2 sections
    - Security
        - Yes, able to be locked
    - Building hours
        - Open and staffed during M-Fri voting time
        - Accommodation can be made for Saturday voting times
    - ADA compliance
        - Yes
        - Bathrooms available
    - Curbside voting
        - Yes
    - Parking
        - Up to 70 parking spaces available exclusive to voters in the Creek Lot directly across from the center
        - 17 spaces in 9A exclusive to voters during weekdays, right at the Center, nonexclusive during Saturday basketball games.
        - Additional parking available in parking deck.
    - Cost
        - $250 for Saturday when they are not regularly open.
- Additional considerations
    - There is a camera in the room, but it can be covered during this time.
    - Basketball events going on but the space and parking would still be available (see parking section above).
    - Not available in Fall 2026 due to football practices and games.

University Methodist Church, Fellowship Room
416 Central Dr, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Basic information
  - Availability for Spring 2026
    - Early Voting, likely
    - Election Day, likely
  - Availability for Fall 2026
    - Early Voting, more challenging
    - Election Day, likely
  - Room size
    - Max capacity is 100
  - Security
    - Yes
  - Building hours
    - Longer hours can be accommodated
  - ADA compliance
    - Yes
    - Bathrooms available
  - Curbside voting
    - Yes
  - Parking
    - Yes
  - Cost
    - Likely free, waiting on confirmation
- Additional considerations
  - Enthusiastic about being a polling site, however, it has large, well-established traditional events during fall early voting. The church would need be further consulted prior to any final decision.
  - Could do voting in the large or small fellowship room, either provides plenty of space.

<u>Non-Viable Alternative Sites</u>
Cordelia Camp Building, Gym
69 University Heights Rd, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Not feasible due to the number of athletes that use the locker room, sports medicine classes, and training.

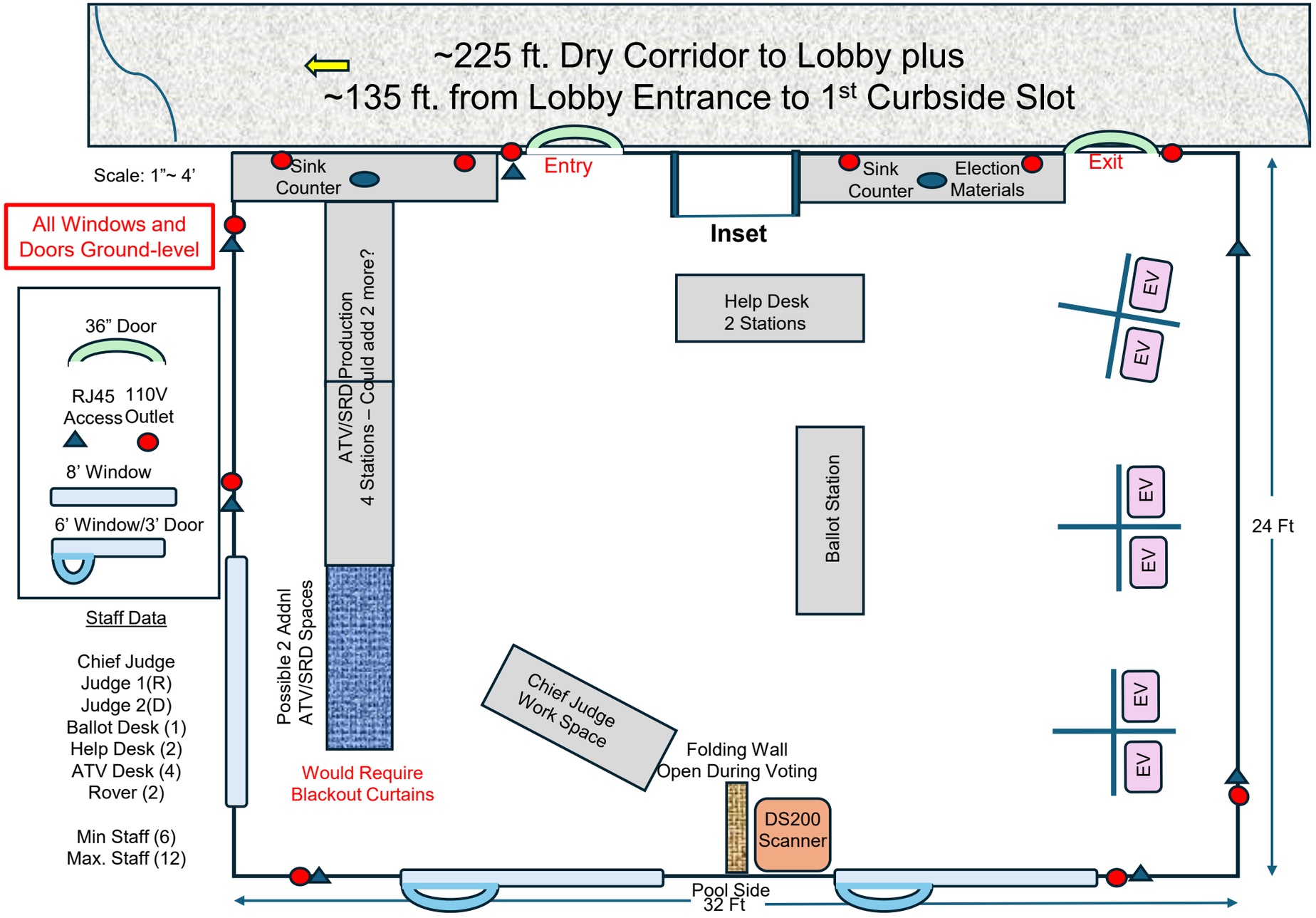
Hunter Library, Flex Space
176 Central Dr, Cullowhee, NC 28723

- Gravel parking lot, not easy to walk, parking is not very viable.

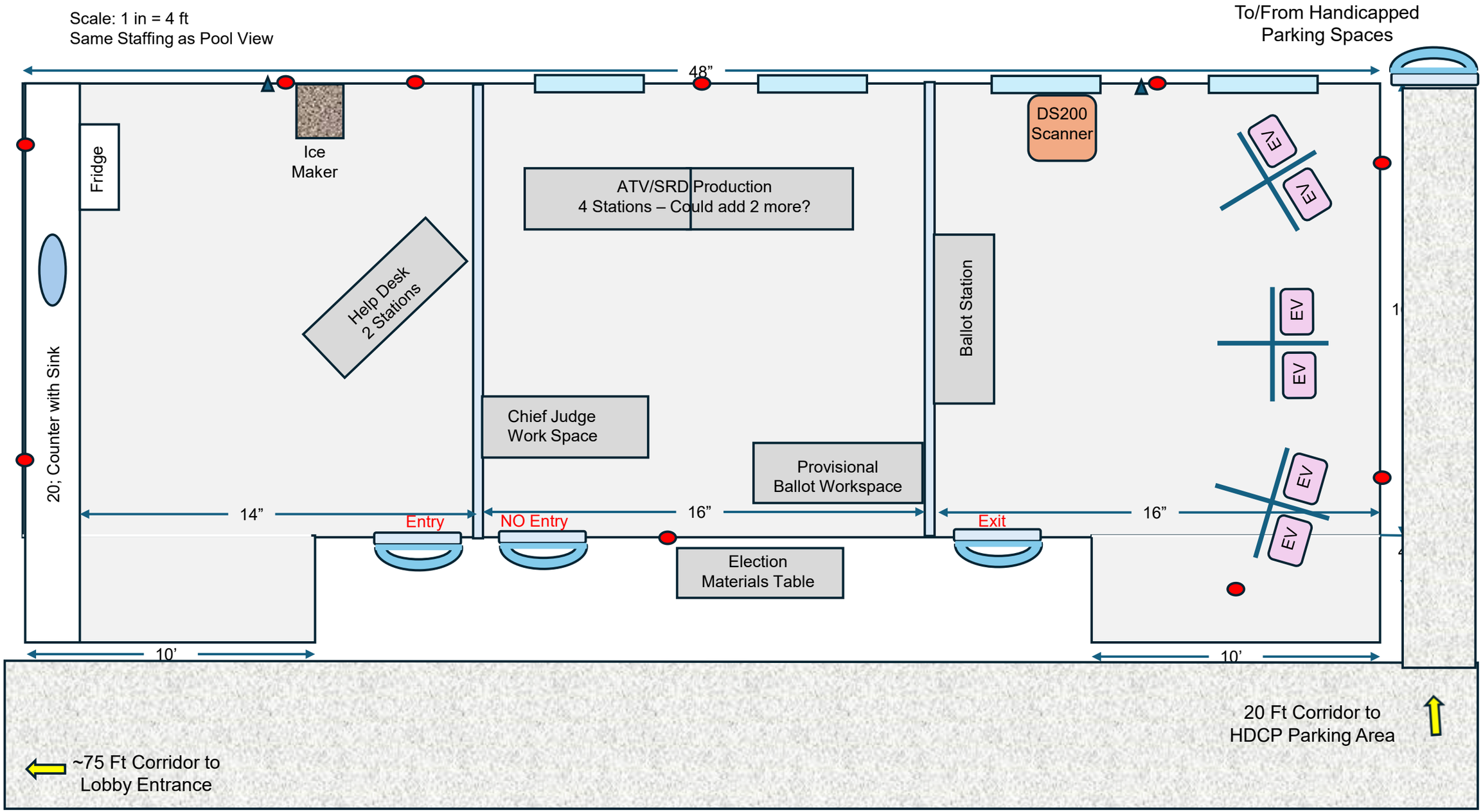
Appendix B – One- vs Two-Site Operation in 2026

Appendix B - STAFF COST COMPARISON FOR 1 VS. 2 SITE OPERATION in 2026

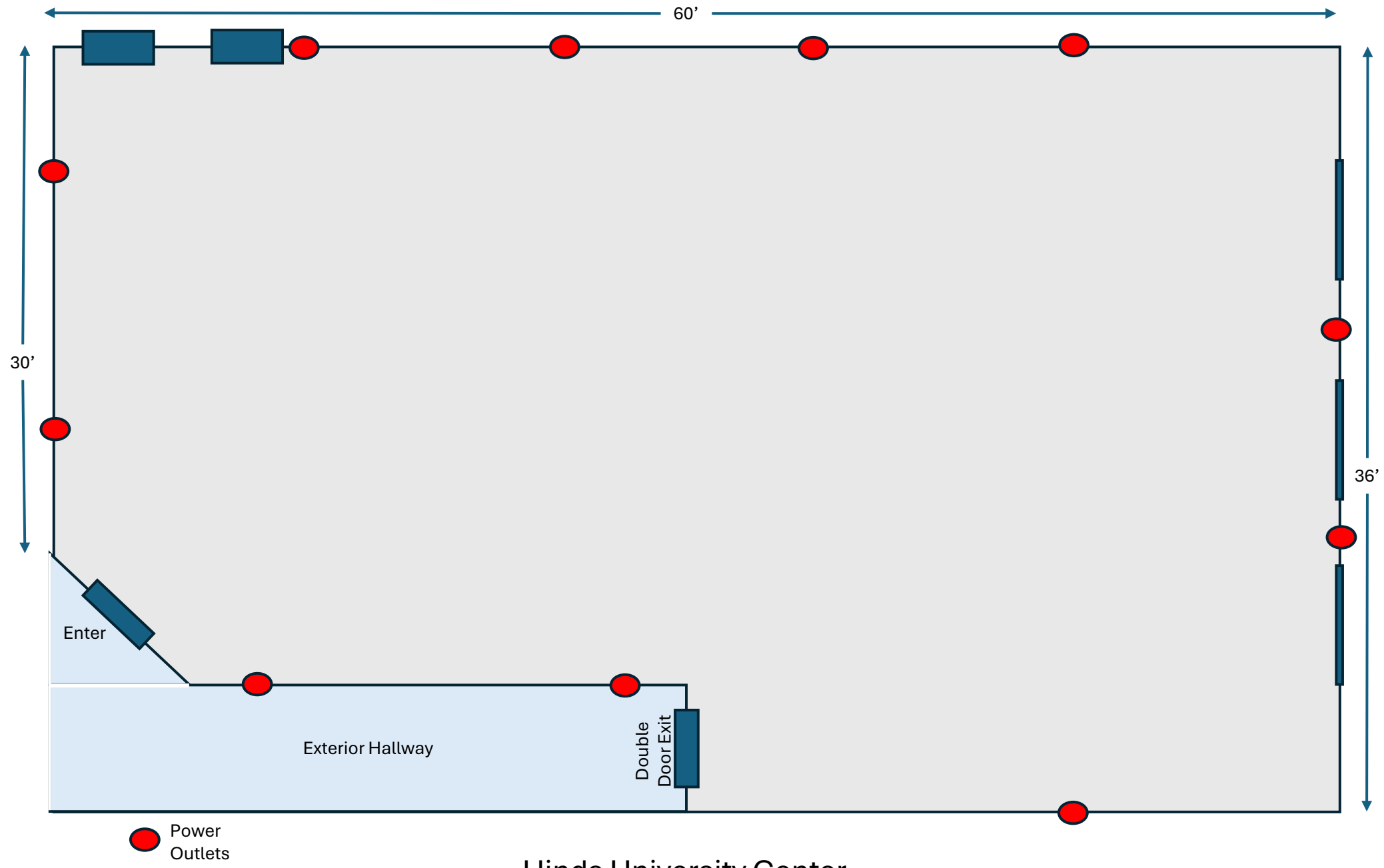
Early Voting Staff -	Each 2 Site Location		WCU	CUL	152 hours for Early Voting				Early Voting Staff -
STAFF MEMBER TITLE	NUMBER REQUIRED (per site)	HOURLY COST per SITE	Hourly x 152 hours		EV Period 2 Site Cost DX152		EV PERIOD 1 Site Cost Hx152	Hourly Cost 1 SITE	NUMBER REQUIRED	STAFF MEMBER TITLE
CHIEF JUDGE	1	$14.00	$2,128	$2,128	$4,256		$2,128	$14.00	1	CHIEF JUDGE
PARTISAN JUDGES	2	$26.00	$3,952	$3,952	$7,904		$3,952	$26.00	2	PARTISAN JUDGES
HELP DESK 2 Computer Positions	1/2 COMPUTERS	$13.00	$1,976	$1,976	$3,952		$3,952	$26.00	2/2 computers	HELP DESK 2 Computer Positions
ATV/SRD PREPARATION 4 computer positions	1-3/4 COMPUTERS	$13.00	$1,976	$1,976	$3,952		$5,928	$39.00	4-6/6 computers	ATV/SRD PREPARATION 6 computer positions
ATV CONTROL	1	$13.00	$1,976	$1,976	$3,952		$1,976	$13.00	1	ATV CONTROL
VOTER ASSISTANCE	1	$13.00	$1,976	$1,976	$3,952		$3,952	$26.00	2	VOTER ASSISTANCE
Sub-Totals	8	$92.00	$13,984	$13,984	$27,968		$21,888	$144.00	12	Sub-Totals
2025 Estimated Staff Costs - 2-Site					$27,968		$21,888			2025 Estimated Staff Costs - 1-Site
							$6,080			Estimated Savings using 1-site in 2025



Park and Recreation – Pool Rooms
New Pool Early Voting Polling Location



Park and Recreation – Room 102A, B, C
Traditional Early Voting Polling Location



Hinds University Center